

**STATEMENT OF JANET SNYDER MATTHEWS, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR
FOR CULTURAL RESOURCES, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, DEPARTMENT
OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SENATE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL
PARKS OF THE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES,
CONCERNING S. 931, THE FEDERAL LAND RECREATIONAL VISITOR
PROTECTION ACT OF 2003.**

June 8, 2004

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to present the views of the Department of the Interior on S. 931, a bill that would direct the Secretary of the Interior to establish a coordinated avalanche protection program that would provide early identification of the potential for avalanches, and reduce the risks and mitigate the effects of avalanches on visitors, recreational users, neighboring communities, and transportation corridors.

The Department supports the concepts contained in S. 931. However, the Department cannot support the bill unless amended to (1) delete the formation of a new grants program, and (2) designate the Secretary of Agriculture as the lead for this bill. At a time when we are trying to reduce backlogs and maintain what we already own, we cannot afford to take on the new funding responsibilities under this grants program.

The history of avalanches influencing visitor safety on public lands is significant and well-documented. Three hundred and ninety-two people have perished in avalanches on public lands in the past twenty years and as winter sport activities continue to rise, so will avalanche incidents. Avalanche fatalities on National Park Service (NPS) managed lands account for about six percent, whereas avalanche fatalities on National Forest lands

account for about ninety percent of the total. Avalanches kill more people on public lands than any other natural event.

The National Park Service and United States Forest Service have actively managed a coordinated aggressive avalanche protection program since the late 1930's. Although the National Park Service provides limited funding and extensive data collection to the Forest Service, it should be noted that the Forest Service is the lead agency with regard to avalanche awareness and mitigation efforts. The Forest Service program includes managing the National Avalanche Center in Ketchum, Idaho, as well as fifteen regional backcountry avalanche centers. These avalanche centers issue avalanche danger advisories for limited and specified geographic areas throughout the west, the northeast, and Alaska.

Currently these programs include snow pack and climate analysis, provide avalanche awareness information via publications, visitor centers, weather radio, and internet sites, teach avalanche awareness classes to the public, and develop and provide avalanche control work using explosives and passive control devices. It is recognized that these centers only exist in and serve a limited number of geographic areas, and all have limited resources. However, they continue to provide information to millions of recreation users and to other government and private agencies.

The primary avalanche control method includes hand and aerial projected explosive charges. However, many areas are using passive control measures such as the spreading

of charcoal on avalanche prone slopes and manually triggered releases. Although the bill prescribes the use of artillery, the National Park Service is prohibited from using this method in congressionally designated wilderness areas, where the majority of avalanche hazard zones exist in the National Park System. The artillery systems that are used in NPS areas were not designed to trigger avalanches or to be used in very cold environments. In 1999, Yellowstone National Park experienced several difficulties with unexploded ordnance resulting in risk to park visitors and our employees. Military systems other than the ones currently employed have been carefully analyzed and none appear to be applicable as avalanche control systems.

To further complicate this issue the U.S. military recently requested the return of five howitzers that cooperators were using to prevent avalanches, including the one at Yellowstone, to be used for active military service. Of the many benefits of the bill, developing alternatives to military artillery for avalanche control would be very desirable.

We recognize that there is much room for improvement in avalanche management methods, and the Department respectfully urges this committee to consider the following suggestions for strengthening S. 931 and making its implementation more efficient and effective.

First, we recommend that the bill designate the Secretary of Agriculture to lead the establishment of a coordinated avalanche program. The U.S. Forest Service has considerable experience in avalanche control and data gathering, oversight of National

Avalanche Centers, and a greater percentage of incidents that warrant the designation of the Department of Agriculture as the best department to develop and manage the program.

Secondly, we recommend that the formation of a new grants program under section 3(e) be deleted from the bill. The Departments of Agriculture and the Interior must focus existing funding on effectively managing Federal lands, including avalanche awareness and protection. Creating a new responsibility to fund grants could divert available funds away from these operational needs.

We believe that this bill will provide the appropriate Federal support for services such as avalanche forecasting, munitions management, and public information to ensure visitor protection on public lands.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my remarks. Thank you for the opportunity to provide our perspective. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.